Representations of Poverty in Children’s Picture Books

Presented by: Bettie McGinness
Why look at issues of poverty and race in picture books?

• As of 2005,
• 17.6% of children in U.S. lived in poverty
• or about 12 million children
• 40% of children lived in low-income homes

U.S. Census Bureau, 2006 & National Center for Children in Poverty, 2006

Worth looking at - http://www.nccp.org/faq.html#question
Why look at issues of poverty and race in picture books?

- Children often do not see poverty represented in books even if they see it around them.

- Poverty representations that they do see in books may be stereotypical or misleading.

- Picture books provide “visual images to children that give them cultural information about themselves, others, and the relative status of group membership” (Hurley, 2005)
Why look at issues of poverty and race in picture books?

• Other children who do not live in poverty also need to see and understand images of poverty.

• “Literature can be a powerful vehicle for understanding cultures and experiences different from our own” (Davis et. al, 2005).
So, has anyone looked at this issue before?

• Children vs. adult views on poverty (Chafel, 1997)
  • Both saw poverty as individual rather than systemic problem
  • Important because views about the cause of poverty affects social policy
Any others?

• Eight year old children and the “nature, causes, justification, alleviation of poverty” (Chafel & Neitzel, 2005, p. 433)
  
  • Eight year olds were still flexible in their thinking about poverty

• The children thought it might be beyond individual’s control
Yes, but what about the literature?

• Content analysis of children’s books (Chafel et. al, 1997)
  • 1944 through 1993
  • Both picture and chapter books
  • Based on idea that children construct knowledge based on their developmental level
  • The selection does not “substantially misrepresent the poor” (p. 24)
So, why look at it again?

• Update the books

• Look at the ideas in a more social way
  • We do not learn in a vacuum – our society affects our learning
    • Picture books are powerful conveyors of societal norms
    • We learn as we interact with others and they share their viewpoints
    • Mixing the two opens up avenues for discussion and a more nuanced understanding
Questions

• How is poverty represented in contemporary fictional picture books for children?

• What themes or common representations, if any, emerge from the picture books studied?
So, how were books chosen?

- Small scale pilot study
- Searched Amazon.com and Books in Print for
  - homeless, homelessness
  - poverty
  - within picture books ages 4-8
- Books must have poverty or homelessness as primary theme
Which books were rejected?

• Published before 1990
• Folktales
• Historical Fiction
• Non-fiction

Why?
Narrowing down to 10 – not as hard as you might think!

- Preference for those that
  - Appear on both lists
  - Have won awards
  - Have been well-reviewed or are by well-known authors
  - Likely to be widely available for purchase by school libraries
Looking, looking, looking…

• Read for storyline

• Find pictures / text that directly represent poverty

• Compare these pictures / texts between books to find recurrent themes or representation types
Ta da! The Final 10!


Setting

• Four of ten set in other countries
  • The Roses in My Carpets – Afghanistan
  • A Handful of Seeds – Central America
  • Beatrice’s Goat – Uganda
  • The Caged Birds of Phnom Penh – Cambodia

• Authors not from countries presented

• May make poverty seem exotic – only happens elsewhere
Ethnicity

• Eight of ten books show people of color in poverty
  • All the books set in other countries
  • Four of the six set in the U.S.
• Only one of the books where the main character is white is a child the one dealing with poverty
• May seem to children that poverty is only problem for people of color
• May then be seen as deserved and can be perpetuated by prejudices
Ethnicity continued

• A Shelter in Our Car – Jamaican mother and child
• Lights on the River – Latino migrant workers
• December – undetermined – possibly Latino mother and child
• Angel City – African American man and Mexican baby
• Gowanus Dogs – White adult male
• Fly Away Home – White father and son
Are these ethnicity results representative of U.S. Census information?

- Not representative of what U.S. census says
  - 33% of black children and 28% of Latino children live in poverty
  - 10% of white children live in poverty
  - Due to numbers, though, white children make up 38% of all children living in poverty in U.S.
Family Structure

• Four of ten books showed single mothers
  • December, A Shelter in Our Car, The Roses in My Carpets, and Beatrice’s Goats

• Two of ten books show single father
  • Fly Away Home, Angel City

• Two books show extended family
  • Lights on the River, The Caged Birds of Phnom Penh

• Two books show no formal family structure
  • Gowanus Dogs, A Handful of Seeds
Do these family structures match U.S. Information?

• Somewhat
  • 1996 – 71% of children receiving welfare benefits lived in single parent homes (Bernard, 1998)
  • 2006 – 51% of children in low-income families lived in single parent homes (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2006)

• This sample presents a broader view of families, partially due to settings outside the U.S.

• Can help to show that poverty is not always connected to broken families.
Causes of Poverty

• Two books did not directly address initial cause of poverty
  • Beatrice’s Goat, Angel City

• Three attribute poverty to lack of available work
  • A Shelter in Our Car, Gowanus Dogs, December

• Two attribute poverty to low wage jobs
  • Fly Away Home, Lights on the River

• Two attribute poverty to death of adult breadwinner
  • The Roses in My Carpets, A Handful of Seeds
Why is cause important?

- Social policy often based on understandings of the causes of poverty
  - Systemic
    - Low wages
    - Death of breadwinner
  - Individual
    - Not having a job
Effects of poverty

• Unable to afford little luxuries - crayons in Angel City
• Unable to attend school in Beatrice’s Goat
• Hunger in A Handful of Seeds, The Roses in My Carpets, and December
• In 9 of 10 books, lack of adequate housing
  • December & Gowanus Dogs – sleep in boxes
  • Fly Away Home & A Shelter in Our Car – live in airport and car
  • Lights on the River, The Caged Birds of Phnom Penh, A Handful of Seeds, and The Roses in My Carpets – inadequate, dirty, or cramped housing
Effects of poverty continued

• In 9 of 10 books – anger or frustration showed
  • Gowanus Dogs – no dog if no home
  • A Handful of Seeds – cries when garden is destroyed
  • Beatrice’s Goat – wants to go to school
  • Angel City – fear of violent neighborhood
  • The Roses in My Carpets – hates taking aid
  • A Shelter in Our Car – discomfort of car and cold baths in park
  • Lights on the River – Others have so much more
  • Fly Away Home – Families meeting at airport and going home
  • The Caged Birds of Phnom Penh – hardships and lack of hope
Why are effects important?

- In the past, beggars and working poor often portrayed as happy without conditions
- This leads to an idealistic view of poverty
  - Mind over matter
  - The individual can overcome the hardships regardless of what society does or does not do
- There is not really a terrible need for help
Solutions to poverty

• 9 of 10 books have characters strategizing to escape poverty
  - Finding work or better work – Gowanus Dogs, A Shelter in Our Car, Fly Away Home, A Handful of Seeds
  - Miracle – December, The Caged Birds of Phnom Penh
  - Symbol – Lights on the River
  - Charity – Beatrice’s Goat, The Roses in My Carpets
Why are the solutions important?

• Once again, individual vs. systemic
• Can children count on a miracle?
• Aid may be seen as bad and / or weak
• Poverty is only a temporary obstacle
• As with other topics, in real life not always happy ending
Story Resolutions

• So, do they live happily ever after?
  • No – The Roses in My Carpets, Lights on the River, Angel City,
  • Express hope that maybe it will get better – Fly Away Home, The Caged Birds of Phnom Penh
  • Happier days ahead – Gowanus Dogs, December, and A Shelter in Our Car due to jobs and Beatrice’s Goat due to school
  • Complex ending – A Handful of Seeds – garden will feed them, but life still subsistence
Last thoughts

• When read uncritically, it is possible for books to “contribute to the formation of stereotypes and attitudes.” (Kohl, 1995)

• “Children’s books contribute to the formation of culture, and some books can even transform the way children look at and relate to the world.” (Kohl, 1995)

• Remember, interactions with texts and others help children construct beliefs within their social world.
Some more books to consider:


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